

## The Research Whisperer

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# The journal paper that almost ended my career before it started

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<https://theresearchwhisperer.files.wordpress.com/2015/09/jenny-ostini-small.jpg>) Jenny Ostini is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow, Digital Futures Collaborative Research Network at the University of Southern Queensland.

*She is a qualitative social scientist and media studies researcher who is interested in the production, consumption, use, and transformation of knowledge, and social change in a digital environment.*

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Let me tell you a story.

Be patient with me as it's a good story but needs a little time to unwind because it's true. I can't mess with the characters or timeline for you, the modern [TL;DR](http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=TLDR) (<http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=TLDR>) reader.

A long time ago, I was a graduate student in America.

Coursework was compulsory, and after coursework came comprehensive exams where you were shut in a room for three days and tried to show that you had mastered all the theory and literature to be a true scholar in your field.

Before you could take these exams you had to have all your coursework completed and signed off.

And here is the crux of my story.

Of all the many graduate level seminars I had taken, only one was a two semester, eight credit course. I had an "incomplete" on this course. It was a seminar in applied research methods, and the requirement for it was to conduct a piece of said research, write a journal paper, and have this paper submitted for publication. It didn't have to be published to get a grade, but it had to be written to the point of submission. I had done this.

The course was all about the process of doing research, taking it from inception to dissemination. It was an excellent aim.

A chaired professor ran the course and he had opinions. I already knew that I was never going to be a hardcore quantitative social scientist, but I knew this guy loved numbers. I designed a neat piece of research looking at media coverage of a specific international political issue. I used content analysis because that was about as quantitative as I could persuade myself to be. The research question was whether the political system in which media operated influenced the way national media covered an issue of national importance. It included theory-testing of a dominant paradigm in communication theory: that there were four ways in which media operated, the "four theories of the press." It postulated a new model for classifying press systems. It looked at English and Chinese-language newspapers covering China, Japan, Hong Kong, and Taiwan scuffling over the Diaoyu (Senkaku) Islands (which happens to still be a relevant issue today.)

I was really satisfied with that piece of work. Even though I speak Mandarin, I brought a colleague on board to work with me on the Chinese-language content analysis so that we didn't miss any nuances.

The journal paper that almost ended my career before it started... <https://theresearchwhisperer.wordpress.com/2015/09/08/paper...>

The professor hated it. No, it was deeper than that. He couldn't even understand what we were doing in the paper. Not because he couldn't – he was a very smart man – but because he wouldn't. It was outside his research paradigm and smacked of qualitative research. Knowing this might be an issue, I had cleared the project with him before starting it. I thought I had forestalled any problems. The process degenerated to the point where we would meet weekly over the paper, take notes of our meetings, and email the minutes to each other afterwards.

Bear in mind that I was a graduate student, and an international one at that. All the power in this relationship was on his side. I talked to my advisor about the problem. She told me that she could do nothing; that his hatred of her and her type of work was so great that if she intervened in any way, I would suffer more. I had to solve the problem myself.

I often wonder if my research interest in power, ideology, and society was born back in those days of conflict. Maybe I need to thank that long-ago professor?

Time was running out. My visa was dependant on ongoing progress. Ongoing progress was dependant on receiving a grade for that course. Receiving a grade for that course was dependant on a resolution of some sort. Oh, and did I mention that I had a scholarship whose continuation was riding on all of this, too?

I was determined not to change the fundamentals of the paper because, even as a student, I thought it was a good piece of work. Not earth-shattering, but solid enough to stand as a contribution to the field.

At my final meeting with the professor, I firmly and politely put forward an idea. I acknowledged that we clearly had issues that weren't going to be immediately resolved, even though we'd been working at this for more than a year. I asked the professor to consider sending the paper to the head of the school. This was a big risk for me because the head of school was also a quantitative social scientist in the same field of research as this professor. I said that I would accept whatever judgement the head of school made on the paper. The meeting closed with polite, but not quite friendly, handshakes.

The next day an 'A' appeared on my transcript for that course.

Fast forward 15 years: after years outside academia, I've returned. I'm setting up things like ResearchGate and Google Scholar. I have 63 citations for that paper. Last week, I got an email from ResearchGate saying, "Congratulations, your research is in the spotlight. Your article was the most viewed publication from your department last week".

I'm not quite sure what the moral of the story is: believe in yourself? You will learn much about politics and power in academia? Stick in it for the long haul?

I leave it to you.

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#### The paper in question:

Ostini, Jennifer and Fung, Anthony Y.H. (2002) [Beyond the four theories of the press: A new model of national media systems](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1207/S15327825MCS0501_4#.Ve0v23vz0nk) ([http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1207/S15327825MCS0501\\_4#.Ve0v23vz0nk](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1207/S15327825MCS0501_4#.Ve0v23vz0nk)). *Mass Communication and Society*, 5 (1). pp. 41-56. ISSN 1520-5436, DOI 10.1207/S15327825MCS0501\_4

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